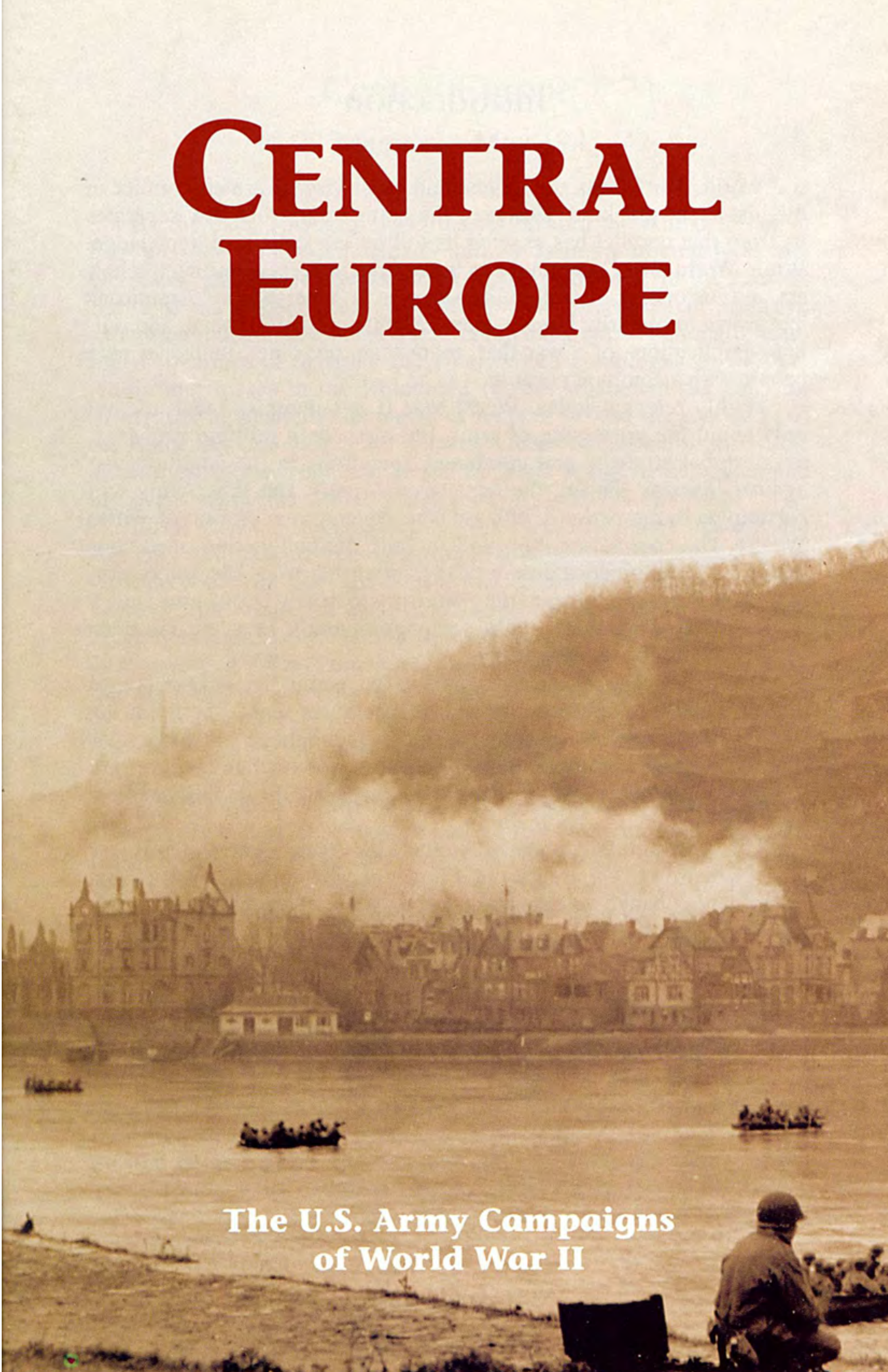
Central Europe



The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Edward N. Bedessem. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

GORDON R. SULLIVAN
General, United States Army
Chief of Staff

Central Europe
22 March–11 May 1945

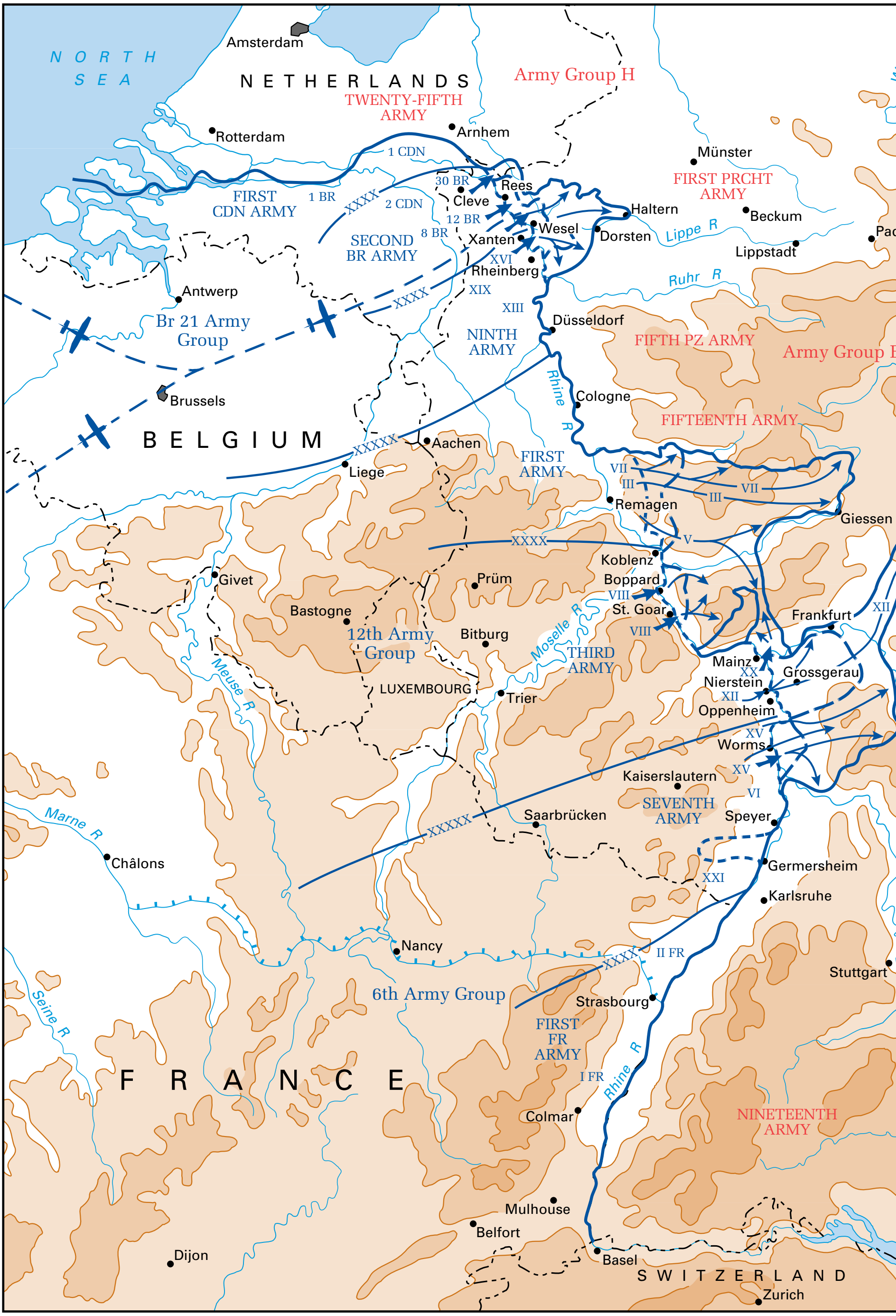
By the early spring of 1945 events favored the Allied forces in Europe. The Anglo-Americans had by January turned back the Germans' December counterattack in the Ardennes, in the famous Battle of the Bulge. The failure of this last great German offensive exhausted much of the Third Reich's remaining combat strength, leaving it ill-prepared to resist the final Allied campaigns in Europe. Additional losses in the Rhineland further weakened the *German Army*, leaving shattered remnants of units to defend the east bank of the Rhine. By mid-March the western Allies had pushed to the Rhine along most of the front, had seized an intact bridge at Remagen, and had even established a small bridgehead on the river's east bank.

In the east the Soviets had overrun most of Poland, pushed into Hungary and eastern Czechoslovakia, and temporarily halted at the German border on the Oder-Neisse line. These rapid advances on the Eastern Front destroyed additional veteran German combat units and severely limited Hitler's ability to reinforce his Rhine defenses. Thus, as the western Allies completed their preparations for the final drive into the heart of Germany, victory seemed within sight.

Strategic Setting

The Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, had 90 full-strength divisions under his command, including 25 armored and 5 airborne, thus controlling one of the largest and most potent forces ever committed to the field of battle. The Allied front along the Rhine stretched 450 air miles from the river's mouth at the North Sea in the Netherlands to the Swiss border in the south.

The forces along this line were organized into three army groups. In the north, from the North Sea to a point about 10 miles north of Cologne, was the British 21 Army Group commanded by Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery, victor at El Alamein and one of the main planners of the Normandy invasion. Under Montgomery, the First Canadian Army held the left flank of the Allied line, with the Second British Army in the center and the Ninth U.S. Army to the south. Holding the middle of the Allied line from the Ninth Army's right flank to a point about 15 miles south of Mainz was the 12th



NORTH SEA
Amsterdam
NETHERLANDS
Army Group H
TWENTY-FIFTH ARMY
Rotterdam
Arnhem
1 CDN
Münster
FIRST PRCHT ARMY
30 BR
Rees
FIRST CDN ARMY
1 BR
Cleve
2 CDN
12 BR
Haltern
Beckum
Wesel
SECOND BR ARMY
8 BR
Xanten
Dorsten
Lippe R
Lippstadt
XVI
Rheinberg
Antwerp
XIX
Ruhr R
XIII
Br 21 Army Group
Düsseldorf
NINTH ARMY
FIFTH PZ ARMY
Army Group B
Brussels
Rhine R
Cologne
FIFTEENTH ARMY
BELGIUM
Aachen
FIRST ARMY
Liege
VII
III
Remagen
Giessen
V
Koblenz
Givet
Prüm
Boppard
VIII
St. Goar
Bastogne
Frankfurt
XII
12th Army Group
Bitburg
Moselle R
THIRD ARMY
Mainz
XX
Grossgerau
Nierstein
Meuse R
LUXEMBOURG
Trier
XII
Oppenheim
XV
Worms
XV
Kaiserslautern
VI
SEVENTH ARMY
Speyer
Saarbrücken
Marne R
Châlons
Germersheim
XXI
Karlsruhe
Nancy
II FR
Stuttgart
6th Army Group
Strasbourg
Seine R
FIRST FR ARMY
I FR
Rhine R
FRANCE
NINETEENTH ARMY
Colmar
Mulhouse
Belfort
Basel
Dijon
SWITZERLAND
Zurich



CROSSING THE RHINE RIVER
22–28 March 1945
Front line, 22 Mar
Front line, 26 Mar
Front line, 28 Mar
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
200
400
800 and Above
0
50
Miles
G E R M A N Y
G E R M A N Y
C Z E C H O S L O V A K I A
AUSTRIA
AUSTRIA
AUSTRIA
SEVENTH ARMY
FIRST ARMY
Army Group G
Berlin
Potsdam
Hannover
Magdeburg
Torgau
Leipzig
Dresden
Kassel
Gotha
Erfurt
Weimar
Jena
Ohrdruf
Chemnitz
Karlsbad
Prague
Coburg
Bayreuth
Bamberg
Aschaffenburg
Würzburg
Pilsen
Nuremberg
Heilbronn
Regensburg
Augsburg
Munich
Weser R
Leine R
Elbe R
Mulde R
Main R
Danube R
Danube R

Army Group under the command of Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley. Bradley had two American armies, the First Army on the left (north) and the Third Army on the right (south). Completing the Allied line to the Swiss border was the 6th Army Group commanded by Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, with the Seventh U.S. Army in the north and the First French Army on the Allied right, or southern, flank.

As these three army groups cleared out the *Wehrmacht* west of the Rhine, Eisenhower began to rethink his plans for the final drive across the Rhine and into the heart of Germany. Originally the Supreme Commander had planned to draw all his forces up to the west bank of the Rhine, using the river as a natural barrier to help cover the inactive sections of his line. The main thrust beyond the river was to be made in the north by Montgomery's 21 Army Group, elements of which were to proceed east to a juncture with the First Army as it made a secondary advance northeast from below the Ruhr River. If successful, this pincer movement would envelop the Ruhr industrial area, neutralizing the largest concentration of German industrial capacity left to Nazi Germany.

After capturing the Ruhr, Eisenhower planned to have 21 Army Group continue its drive east across the plains of northern Germany to Berlin. The 12th and 6th Army Groups were to mount a subsidiary offensive to keep the Germans off balance and diminish their ability to stop the northern thrust. This secondary drive would also give Eisenhower a degree of flexibility in case the northern attack ran into difficulties.

For several reasons Eisenhower began to readjust these plans toward the end of March. First, his headquarters received reports that Soviet forces held a bridgehead over the Oder River, a mere 30 miles from Berlin. Since the Allied armies on the Rhine were more than 300 miles from Berlin, with the Elbe River still to be crossed 200 miles ahead, it seemed clear that the Soviets would capture Berlin long before the western Allies could reach it. Eisenhower thus turned his attention to other objectives, most notably a rapid junction with the Soviets to cut the *German Army* in two and prevent any possibility of a unified Nazi defense effort. Once this was accomplished the remaining German forces could be defeated in detail.

In addition, there was the matter of the Ruhr. Although the Ruhr area still contained a significant number of enemy troops and enough industry to retain its importance as a major objective, Allied intelligence reported that much of the region's armament industry was moving southeast, deeper into Germany. This increased the importance of the southern offensives across the Rhine.

Also focusing Eisenhower's attention on the southern drive was concern over the "National Redoubt." According to rumor, Hitler's most fanatically loyal troops were preparing to make a lengthy, last-ditch stand in the natural fortresses formed by the rugged alpine mountains of southern Germany and western Austria. If they held out for a year or more, dissension between the Soviet Union and the western Allies might give them political leverage for some kind of favorable peace settlement. In reality, by the time of the Allied Rhine crossings the *Wehrmacht* had suffered such severe defeats on both the Eastern and Western Fronts that it could barely manage to mount effective delaying actions, much less muster enough troops to establish a well organized alpine resistance force. Still, Allied intelligence could not entirely discount the possibility that remnants of the *German Army* would attempt a suicidal last stand in the Alps. Denying Hitler's forces this opportunity became another argument for rethinking the role of the southern drive through Germany.

Perhaps the most compelling reason, though, for increasing the emphasis on this southern drive had more to do with the actions of Americans than those of Germans. While Montgomery was carefully and cautiously planning for the main thrust in the north, complete with massive artillery preparation and an airborne assault, American forces in the south were displaying the kind of basic aggressiveness that Eisenhower wanted to see. On 7 March elements of Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges' First Army had captured a bridge over the Rhine at Remagen and had been steadily expanding the bridgehead.

To the south in the Saar-Palatinate region, Lt. Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army had dealt a devastating blow to the *German Seventh Army* and, in conjunction with the U.S. Seventh Army, had nearly destroyed the *German First Army*. In five days of battle, from 18–22 March, Patton's forces captured over 68,000 Germans. These bold actions eliminated the last German positions west of the Rhine. Although Montgomery's drive was still planned as the main effort, Eisenhower believed that the momentum of the American forces to the south should not be squandered by having them merely hold the line at the Rhine or make only limited diversionary attacks beyond it. By the end of March the Supreme Commander thus leaned toward a decision to place more responsibility on his southern forces. The events of the first few days of the final campaign would be enough to convince him that this was the proper course of action.



U.S. Seventh Army infantrymen climb the enemy-held east bank after crossing the Rhine. (National Archives)

Operations

On 19 March Eisenhower told Bradley to prepare the First Army for a breakout from the Remagen bridgehead anytime after 22 March. The same day, in response to the Third Army's robust showing in the Saar-Palatinate region, and in order to have another strong force on the Rhine's east bank guarding the First Army's flank, Bradley gave Patton the go-ahead for an assault crossing of the Rhine as soon as possible.

These were exactly the orders for which Patton had hoped. The aggressive American general felt that if a sufficiently strong force could be thrown across the river and significant gains made, then Eisenhower might transfer responsibility for the main drive through Germany from Montgomery's 21 Army Group to Bradley's 12th. Patton also appreciated the opportunity he now had to beat Montgomery across the river and win for the Third Army the coveted

distinction of making the first assault crossing of the Rhine in modern history. To accomplish this, he had to move quickly.

On 21 March Patton ordered his XII Corps to prepare for an assault over the Rhine on the following night, one day before Montgomery's scheduled crossing. While this was certainly short notice, it did not catch the XII Corps completely unaware. As soon as Patton had received the orders on the 19th to make a crossing, he had begun sending assault boats, bridging equipment, and other supplies forward from depots in Lorraine where they had been stockpiled since autumn in the expectation of just such an opportunity. Seeing this equipment moving up, his frontline soldiers needed no orders from higher headquarters to tell them what it meant.

The location of the river-crossing assault was critical. Patton knew that the most obvious place to jump the river was at Mainz or just downstream, north of the city. The choice was obvious because the Main River, flowing northward 30 miles east of and parallel to the Rhine, turns west and empties into the Rhine at Mainz and an advance south of the city would involve crossing two rivers rather than one. However, Patton also realized that the Germans were aware of this difficulty and would expect his attack north of Mainz. Thus, he decided to feint at Mainz while making his real effort at Nierstein and Oppenheim, 9 to 10 miles south of the city. Following this primary assault, which the XII Corps would undertake, the VIII Corps would execute supporting crossings at Boppard and St. Goar, 25 to 30 miles northwest of Mainz.

The terrain in the vicinity of Nierstein and Oppenheim was conducive to artillery support, with high ground on the west bank overlooking relatively flat land to the east. However, the same flat east bank meant that the bridgehead would have to be rapidly and powerfully reinforced and expanded beyond the river since there was no high ground on which to set up a bridgehead defense. The importance of quickly obtaining a deep bridgehead was increased by the fact that the first access to a decent road network was over 6 miles inland at the town of Grossgerau.

On 22 March, with a bright moon lighting the late-night sky, elements of the XII Corps' 5th Infantry Division began the Third Army's Rhine crossing. At Nierstein assault troops met no resistance. As the first boats reached the east bank, seven startled Germans surrendered and then paddled themselves unescorted to the west bank to be placed in custody. Upstream at Oppenheim, however, the effort did not proceed so casually. The first wave of boats was halfway across when the Germans began pouring machine-gun fire into their midst. An intense



Infantrymen of the 6th Armored Division dash across an open street in a battle-torn German town. (National Archives)

exchange of fire lasted for about thirty minutes as assault boats kept pushing across the river and those men who had already made it across mounted attacks against the scattered defensive strongpoints. Finally the Germans surrendered, and by midnight units moved out laterally to consolidate the crossing sites and to attack the first villages beyond the river. German resistance everywhere was sporadic, and the hastily mounted counterattacks invariably burned out quickly, causing few casualties. The Germans lacked both the manpower and the heavy equipment to make a more determined defense.

By midafternoon on 23 March all three regiments of the 5th Infantry Division were in the bridgehead, and an attached regiment from the 90th Infantry Division was crossing. Tanks and tank destroyers had been ferried across all morning, and by evening a treadway bridge was open to traffic. By midnight, infantry units had pushed the boundary of the bridgehead more than 5 miles inland, ensuring the unqualified success of the first modern assault crossing of the Rhine.

Two more Third Army crossings, both by the VIII Corps, quickly followed. In the early morning hours of 25 March, elements of the 87th Infantry Division crossed the Rhine to the north at Boppard, and then some twenty-four hours later elements of the 89th Infantry Division crossed 8 miles south of Boppard at St. Goar. Although the defense of these sites was somewhat more determined than that the XII Corps had faced, the difficulties of the Boppard and St. Goar crossings were compounded more by terrain than by German resistance. The VIII Corps crossing sites were located along the Rhine gorge, where the river had carved a deep chasm between two mountain ranges, creating precipitous canyon walls over 300 feet high on both sides. In addition, the river flowed quickly and with unpredictable currents along this part of its course. Still, despite the terrain and enemy machine-gun and 20-mm. antiaircraft gun fire, VIII Corps troops managed to gain control of the east bank's heights, and by dark on the 26th, with German resistance crumbling all along the Rhine, they were preparing to continue the drive the next morning.

Adding to the enemy's woes, the 6th Army Group made an assault across the Rhine on 26 March. At Worms, about 25 miles south of Mainz, the Seventh Army's XV Corps established a bridgehead which it consolidated with the southern shoulder of the Third Army's bridgehead early the next day. After overcoming stiff initial resistance, the XV Corps also advanced beyond the Rhine, opposed primarily by small German strongpoints sited in roadside villages.

On the night of 23 March, after the XII Corps' triumphant assault of the Rhine, Bradley took great pleasure in announcing his success to the world. The 12th Army Group commander boasted that American troops could cross the Rhine anywhere, without aerial bombardment or airborne troops, a direct jab at Montgomery whose troops were at that very moment preparing to launch their own Rhine assault following an intense and elaborate aerial and artillery preparation and with the assistance of two airborne divisions.

Field Marshal Montgomery was, of course, exhibiting his now legendary meticulous and circumspect approach to such enterprises, a lesson he learned early in his North African duels with Rommel and one he could not easily forget. Thus, as his forces had approached the east bank of the river, Montgomery proceeded with one of the most intensive buildups of materiel and manpower of the war. His detailed plans, code-named Operation PLUNDER, were comparable to the Normandy invasion in terms of numbers of men and tons of equipment, supplies, and ammunition to be used. The 21 Army Group had 30 full-strength divisions, 11 each in the Second British and Ninth

U.S. Armies and 8 in the First Canadian Army, providing Montgomery with more than 1,250,000 men.

PLUNDER called for the Second Army to cross at three locations along the 21 Army Group front—at Rees, Xanten, and Rheinberg. The crossings would be preceded by several weeks of aerial bombing and a final massive artillery preparation. The heavy bombing campaign, known as the Interdiction of Northwest Germany, was designed primarily to destroy the lines of communication and supply connecting the Ruhr to the rest of Germany. The main targets were rail yards, bridges, and communication centers, with a secondary focus on fuel-processing and storage facilities and other important industrial sites. During the three days leading up to Montgomery's attack, targets in front of the 21 Army Group zone and in the Ruhr area to the southeast were pummeled by about 11,000 sorties, effectively sealing off the Ruhr while easing the burden on Montgomery's assault forces.

Montgomery had originally planned to attach one corps of the Ninth U.S. Army to the Second British Army, which would use only two of the corps' divisions for the initial assault. The rest of the Ninth Army would remain in reserve until the bridgehead was ready for exploitation. The Ninth Army commander, Lt. Gen. William H. Simpson, and the Second Army's Lt. Gen. Sir Miles C. Dempsey took exception to this approach. Both believed that the plan squandered the great strength in men and equipment that the Ninth Army had assembled and ignored the many logistical problems of placing the Ninth Army's crossing sites within the Second Army's zone.

Field Marshal Montgomery responded to these concerns by making a few small but helpful adjustments to the plan. Although he declined to increase the size of the American crossing force beyond two divisions, he agreed to keep it under Ninth Army rather than Second Army control. In order to increase Simpson's ability to bring his army's strength to bear for exploitation, Montgomery also agreed to turn the bridges at Wesel, just north of the interarmy boundary, over to the Ninth Army once the bridgehead had been secured.

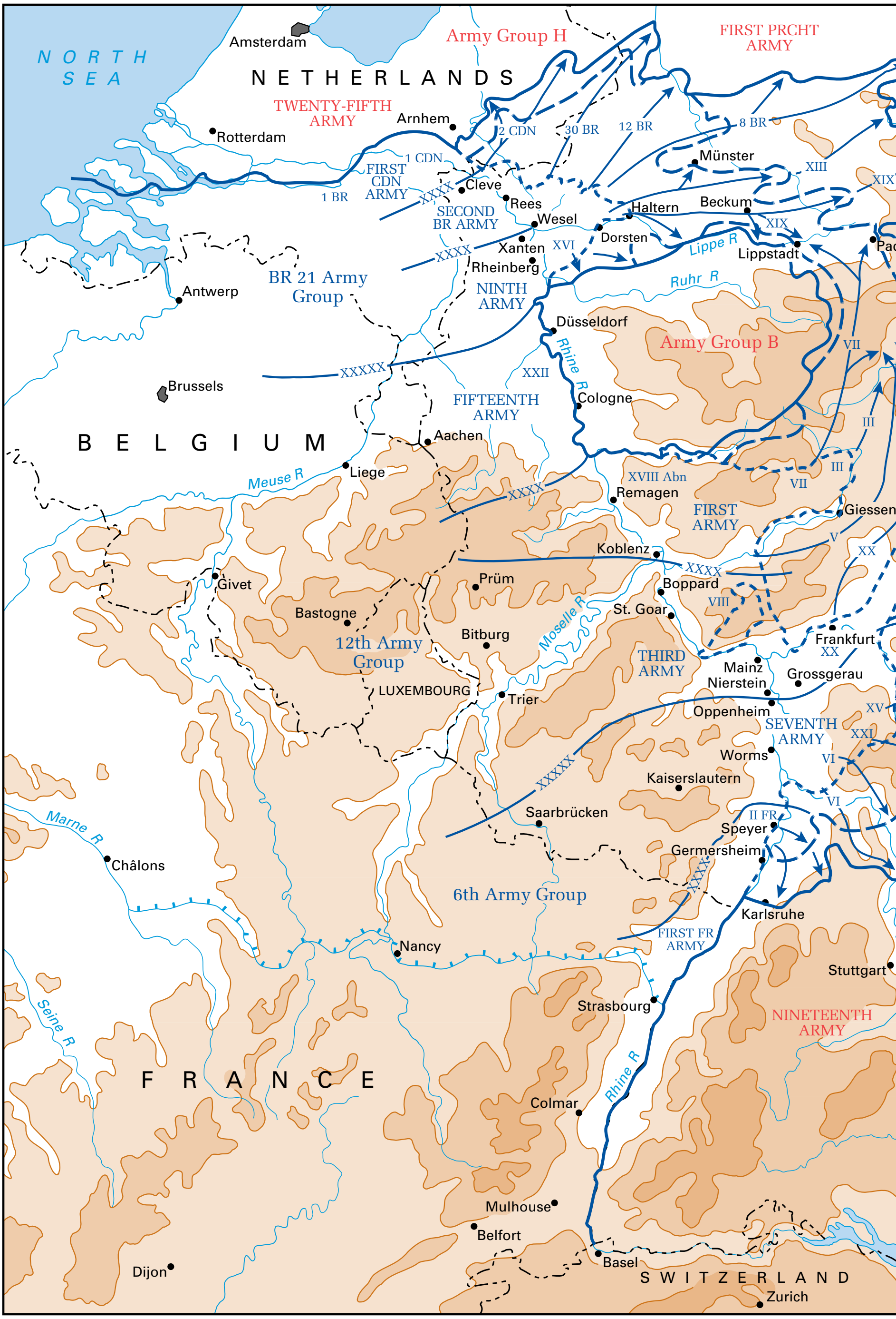
In the southernmost sector of the 21 Army Group's attack, the Ninth Army's assault divisions were to cross the Rhine along an 11-mile section of the front, south of Wesel and the Lippe River. This force would block any German counterattack from the Ruhr. Because of the poor road network on the east bank of this part of the Rhine, a second Ninth Army corps was to cross over the promised Wesel bridges through the British zone north of the Lippe River, which had an abundance of good roads. After driving east nearly 100 miles, this

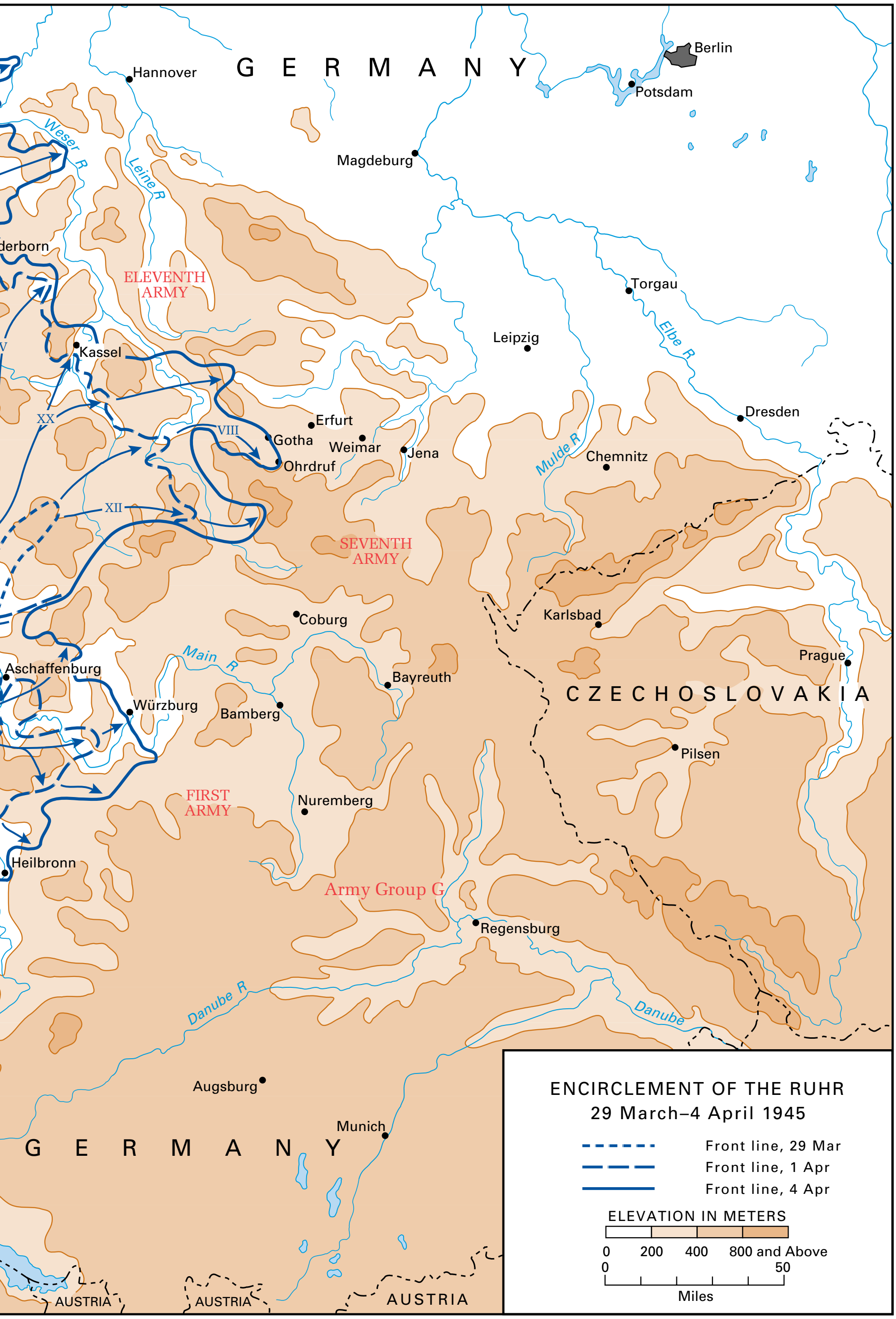
corps was to meet elements of the First Army near Paderborn, completing the encirclement of the Ruhr.

Another important aspect of Montgomery's plan was Operation VARSITY, in which two divisions of the XVIII Airborne Corps were to make an airborne assault over the Rhine. In a departure from standard airborne doctrine, which called for a jump deep behind enemy lines several hours prior to an amphibious assault, VARSITY's drop zones were close behind the German front, within Allied artillery range. Additionally, in order to avoid being caught in the artillery preparation, the paratroopers would jump only after the amphibious troops had reached the Rhine's east bank. The wisdom of putting lightly armed paratroopers so close to the main battlefield was debated, and the plan for amphibious forces to cross the Rhine prior to the parachute drop raised questions as to the utility of making an airborne assault at all. However, Montgomery believed that the paratroopers would quickly link up with the advancing river assault forces, placing the strongest force within the bridgehead as rapidly as possible. Once the bridgehead was secured the British 6th Airborne Division would be transferred to Second Army control, while the U.S. 17th Airborne Division would revert to Ninth Army control.

Montgomery's offensive began on the evening of 23 March with the Second British Army's assault elements massed against three main crossing sites: Rees in the north, Xanten in the center, and Wesel in the south. The two Ninth Army divisions tasked for the assault concentrated in the Rheinberg area south of Wesel. At the northern crossing site, elements of the Second Army's 30 Corps began the assault at about 2100, attempting to distract the Germans from the main crossings at Xanten in the center and Rheinberg to the south. The initial assault waves crossed the river quickly, meeting only light opposition. Meanwhile, 2 miles north of Wesel a Second Army commando brigade slipped across the river and waited within a mile of the city while it was demolished by one thousand tons of bombs delivered by the Royal Air Force Bomber Command. The commandos secured the city late on the morning of 24 March, although scattered resistance continued until dawn on the 25th. The Second Army's 12 Corps and the Ninth Army's XVI Corps began the main effort about 0200 on 24 March, following a massive artillery and air bombardment.

For the American crossing the Ninth Army commander, General Simpson, had chosen the veteran 30th and 79th Infantry Divisions of the XVI Corps. The 30th was to cross between Wesel and Rheinberg while the 79th assaulted south of Rheinberg. In reserve were the XVI Corps' 8th Armored Division, and 35th and 75th Infantry Divisions,


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Army Group H
FIRST PRCHT ARMY
TWENTY-FIFTH ARMY
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1 CDN
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1 BR
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Cleve
Rees
SECOND BR ARMY
Wesel
Haltern
Beckum
XIX
Dorsten
Xanten
XVI
Lippe R
Lippstadt
Rheinberg
BR 21 Army Group
Antwerp
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Army Group B
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Worms
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Kaiserslautern
VI
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Saarbrücken
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SWITZERLAND
Dijon
Zurich



GERMANY
Hannover
Berlin
Potsdam
Magdeburg
Weser R
Leine R
derborn
ELEVENTH ARMY
Torgau
Elbe R
Leipzig
Kassel
XX
VIII
Erfurt
Gotha
Weimar
Jena
Ohrdruf
Mulde R
Chemnitz
Dresden
XII
SEVENTH ARMY
Karlsbad
Coburg
Main R
Aschaffenburg
Bayreuth
Prague
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
Würzburg
Bamberg
Pilsen
FIRST ARMY
Nuremberg
Heilbronn
Army Group G
Regensburg
Danube R
Danube
Augsburg
Munich
GERMANY
AUSTRIA
AUSTRIA
AUSTRIA
ENCIRCLEMENT OF THE RUHR
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0
50
Miles

as well as the Ninth Army's XIII and XIX Corps, each with three divisions. Simpson planned to commit the XIX Corps as soon as possible after the bridgehead had been secured, using the XIII Corps to hold the Rhine south of the crossing sites.

After an hour of extremely intense artillery preparation, which General Eisenhower himself viewed from the front, the 30th Infantry Division began its assault. The artillery fire had been so effective and so perfectly timed that the assault battalions merely motored their storm boats across the river and claimed the east bank against almost no resistance. As subsequent waves of troops crossed, units fanned out to take the first villages beyond the river to only the weakest of opposition. An hour later, at 0300, the 79th Infantry Division began its crossing upriver, achieving much the same results. As heavier equipment was ferried across the Rhine, both divisions began pushing east, penetrating 3 to 6 miles into the German defensive line that day.

To the north, the British crossings had also gone well, with the ground and airborne troops linking up by nightfall. By then the paratroopers had taken all their first day's objectives in addition to 3,500 prisoners.

To the south, the discovery of a defensive gap in front of the 30th Infantry Division fostered the hope that a full-scale breakout would be possible on 25 March. When limited objective attacks provoked little response on the morning of the 25th, the division commander, Maj. Gen. Leland S. Hobbs, formed two mobile task forces to make deeper thrusts with an eye toward punching through the defense altogether and breaking deep into the German rear. Unfortunately, Hobbs had not fully taken into account the nearly nonexistent road network in front of the XVI Corps bridgehead. Faced with trying to make rapid advances through dense forest on rutted dirt roads and muddy trails, which could be strongly defended by a few determined soldiers and well placed roadblocks, the task forces advanced only about 2 miles on the 25th. The next day they gained some more ground, and one even seized its objective, having slogged a total of 6 miles, but the limited progress forced Hobbs to abandon the hope for a quick breakout.

In addition to the poor roads, the 30th Division's breakout attempts were also hampered by the German *116th Panzer Division*. The only potent unit left for commitment against the Allied Rhine crossings in the north, the *116th* began moving south from the Dutch-German border on 25 March against what the Germans considered their most dangerous threat, the U.S. Ninth Army. The enemy armored unit began making its presence felt almost immediately, and by the end of 26 March the combination of the *panzer* division and the rough ter-

rain had conspired to sharply limit the 30th Division's forward progress. With the 79th Infantry Division meeting fierce resistance to the south, General Simpson's only recourse was to commit some of his forces waiting on the west bank of the Rhine. Late on 26 March the 8th Armored Division began moving into the bridgehead.

Although the armored division bolstered his offensive capacity within the bridgehead, Simpson was more interested in sending the XIX Corps across the Wesel bridges, as Montgomery had agreed, and using the better roads north of the Lippe to outflank the enemy in front of the 30th Division. Unfortunately, because of pressure from the Germans in the northern part of the Second Army bridgehead, the British were having trouble completing their bridges at Xanten and were therefore bringing most of their traffic across the river at Wesel. With Montgomery allowing use of the Wesel bridges to the Ninth Army for only five out of every twenty-four hours, and with the road network north of the Lippe under Second Army control, General Simpson was unable to commit or maneuver sufficient forces to make a rapid flanking drive.

By 28 March the 8th Armored Division had expanded the bridgehead by only about 3 miles and still had not reached Dorsten, a town about 15 miles east of the Rhine, whose road junction promised to expand the XVI Corps' offensive options. On the same day, however, Montgomery announced that the east bound roads out of Wesel would be turned over to the Ninth Army on 30 March with the Rhine bridges leading into that city changing hands a day later. Also on 28 March, elements of the U.S. 17th Airborne Division, operating north of the Lippe River in conjunction with British armored forces, dashed to a point some 30 miles east of Wesel, opening a corridor for the XIX Corps and handily outflanking Dorsten and the enemy to the south. General Simpson now had both the opportunity and the means to unleash the power of the Ninth Army and begin in earnest the northern drive to surround the Ruhr.

Simpson began by moving elements of the XIX Corps' 2d Armored Division into the XVI Corps bridgehead on 28 March with orders to cross the Lippe east of Wesel, thereby avoiding that city's traffic jams. Upon passing north of the Lippe on 29 March the 2d Armored Division broke out late that night from the forward position which the XVIII Airborne Corps had gained around Haltern, 12 miles northeast of Dorsten. Throughout the 30th and 31st the armor made an uninterrupted 40-mile drive east to Beckum, cutting two of the Ruhr's three remaining rail lines and severing the autobahn to Berlin. As the rest of the XIX Corps flowed into the wake of this spectacular drive,



"Night view crossing the Rhine" by Gary Sheahan
(Army Art Collection)



the First Army was completing its equally remarkable thrust around the southern and eastern edges of the Ruhr, which within hours would be completely encircled.

The First Army's drive from the Remagen bridgehead began with a breakout before dawn on 25 March. German Field Marshal Walter Model, whose *Army Group B* was charged with the defense of the Ruhr, had deployed his troops heavily along the east-west Sieg River south of Cologne, thinking that the Americans would attack directly north from the Remagen bridgehead. Instead the First Army struck eastward, heading for Giessen and the Lahn River, 65 miles beyond Remagen, before turning north toward Paderborn and a linkup with the Ninth Army. All three corps of the First Army participated in the breakout, which on the first day employed five infantry and two armored divisions. The VII Corps, on the left, had the hardest going due to the German concentration north of the bridgehead, yet its armored columns managed to advance 12 miles beyond their line of departure. The III Corps in the center did not commit its armor on the first day of the breakout, but still made a gain of 4 miles. The V Corps on the right advanced 5 to 8 miles, incurring minimal casualties.

Beginning the next day, 26 March, the armored divisions of all three corps turned these initial gains into a complete breakout, shattering all opposition and roaming at will throughout the enemy's rear areas. By the end of 28 March General Hodges' First Army had crossed the Lahn, having driven at least 50 miles beyond the original line of departure and capturing thousands of astonished German soldiers in the process. Nowhere, it seemed, were the Germans prepared to resist in strength. On the 29th the First Army turned toward Paderborn, about 80 miles north of Giessen, its right flank covered by the Third Army, which had broken out of its own bridgeheads and was headed northeast toward Kassel.

A task force of the VII Corps' 3d Armored Division, which included some of the new M26 Pershing heavy tanks, spearheaded the drive for Paderborn on the 29th. By attaching an infantry regiment of the 104th Infantry Division to the armored division and following the drive closely with the rest of the 104th Division, the VII Corps was well prepared to hold any territory gained. Rolling northward 45 miles without a single casualty, the mobile force stopped for the night a mere 15 miles from its objective. Taking up the advance again the next day, it immediately ran into stiff opposition from students of an *SS panzer* replacement training center located near Paderborn. Equipped with about sixty tanks, the students put up a fanatical resistance, stalling the American armor all day. When the task force failed to

advance on the 31st, Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins, commander of the VII Corps, asked General Simpson if his Ninth Army, driving eastward north of the Ruhr, could provide assistance. Simpson, in turn, ordered a combat command of the 2d Armored Division, which had just reached Beckum, to make a 15-mile advance southeast to Lippstadt, midway between Beckum and the stalled 3d Armored Division spearhead. Early in the afternoon of 1 April elements of the 2d and 3d Armored Divisions met at Lippstadt, linking the Ninth and First Armies and sealing the prized Ruhr industrial complex, along with Model's *Army Group B,* within American lines.

As March turned to April the offensive east of the Rhine was progressing in close accordance with Allied plans. All the armies assigned to cross the Rhine had elements east of the river, including the First Canadian Army in the north, which sent a division through the British bridgehead at Rees, and the First French Army in the south, which on 31 March established its own bridgehead by assault crossings at Germersheim and Speyer, about 50 miles south of Mainz. With spectacular thrusts being made beyond the Rhine nearly every day and the enemy's capacity to resist fading at an ever accelerating rate, the campaign to finish Germany was transitioning into a general pursuit.

In the center of the Allied line, Eisenhower inserted a new army, the Fifteenth, under 12th Army Group control, to hold the western edge of the Ruhr pocket along the Rhine while the Ninth and First Armies squeezed the remaining German defenders there from the north, east, and south. Following the reduction of the Ruhr, the Fifteenth Army was to take over occupation duties in the region as the Ninth, First, and Third Armies pushed farther into Germany.

On 28 March, as these developments unfolded, Eisenhower announced his decision to adjust his plans governing the future course of the offensive. Once the Ruhr was surrounded, he wanted the Ninth Army transferred from the 21 Army Group to the 12th. After the reduction of the Ruhr Pocket, the main thrust east would be made by Bradley's 12th Army Group in the center, rather than by Montgomery's 21 Army Group in the north as originally planned. Montgomery's forces were relegated to securing Bradley's northern flank while Devers' 6th Army Group covered Bradley's southern shoulder. Furthermore, the main objective was no longer Berlin, but Leipzig where a juncture with the Soviet Army would split the remaining German forces in two. Once this was done the 21 Army Group would take Luebeck and Wismar on the Baltic Sea, cutting off the Germans remaining in the Jutland peninsula of Denmark, while the 6th Army Group and the Third Army drove south into Austria.



An American soldier guards German prisoners captured in the Ruhr Pocket. (National Archives)

The British Prime Minister and Chiefs of Staff strongly opposed the new plan. Despite the Russian proximity to Berlin, they argued that the city was still a critical political, if not military, objective. Eisenhower, supported by the American Chiefs of Staff, disagreed. His overriding objective was the swiftest military victory possible. Should the U.S. political leadership direct him to take Berlin, or if a situation arose in which it became militarily advisable to seize the German capital, Eisenhower would do so; otherwise he would pursue those objectives which would end the war soonest. In addition, since Berlin and the rest of Germany had already been divided into occupation zones by representatives of the Allied governments at the Yalta Conference, Eisenhower saw no political advantage in a race for Berlin. Any ground the western Allies gained in the future Soviet zone would merely be relinquished to the Soviets after the war. In the end the campaign proceeded as Eisenhower had planned it.

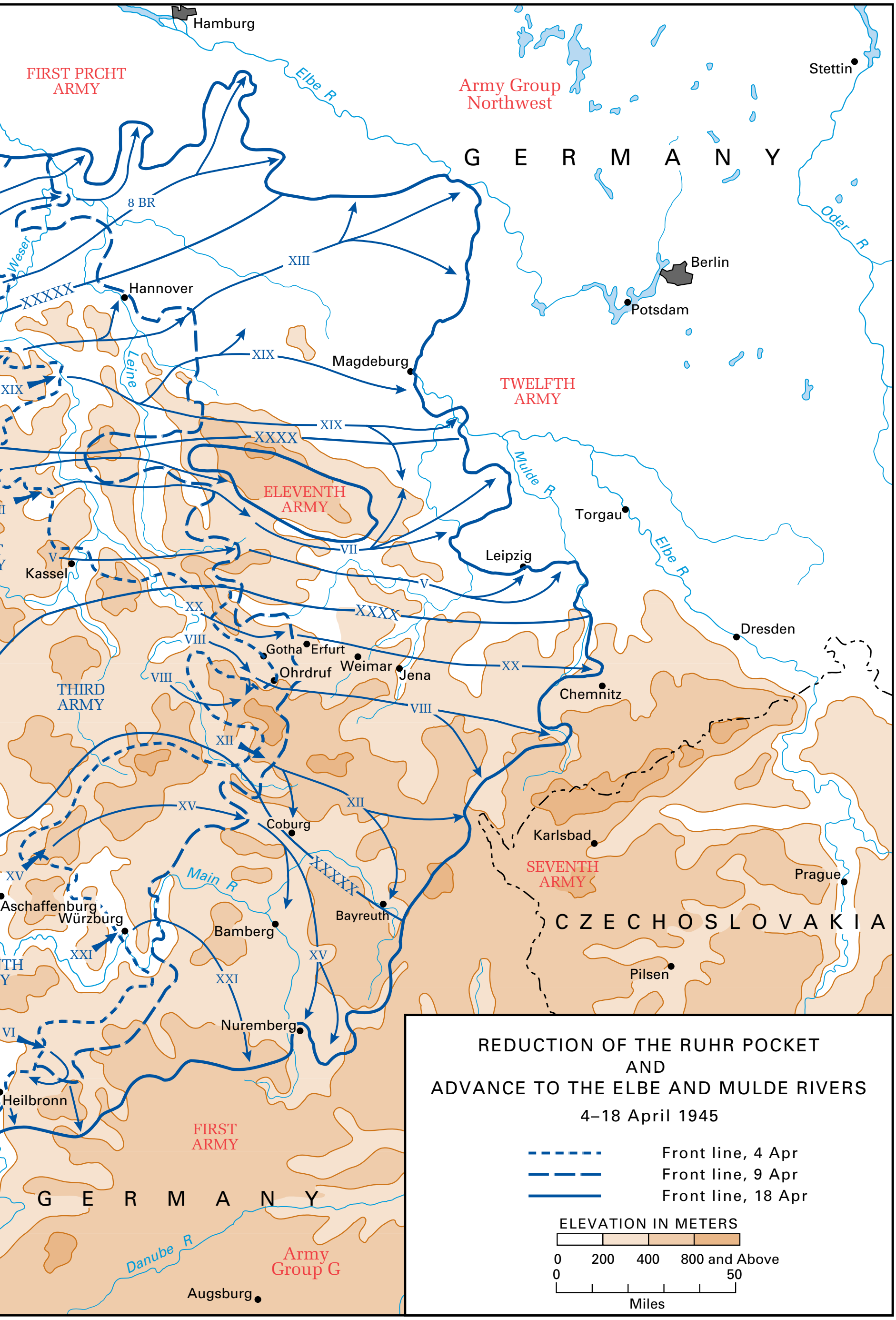
The first step in realizing Eisenhower's plan was the eradication of the Ruhr Pocket. Even before the encirclement had been completed, the Germans in the Ruhr had begun making attempts at a breakout to the

east. All had been unceremoniously repulsed by the vastly superior Allied forces. Meanwhile the Ninth and First Armies began preparing converging attacks using the east-west Ruhr River as a boundary line. The Ninth Army's XVI Corps, which had taken up position north of the Ruhr area after crossing the Rhine, would be assisted in its southward drive by two divisions of the XIX Corps, the rest of which would continue to press eastward along with the XIII Corps. South of the Ruhr River, the First Army's northward attack was to be executed by the XVIII Airborne Corps, which had been transferred to Hodges after Operation VARSITY, and the III Corps, with the First Army's V and VII Corps continuing the offensive east. The Ninth Army's sector of the Ruhr Pocket, although only about a third the size of the First Army's sector south of the river, contained the majority of the densely urbanized industrial area within the encirclement. The First Army's area, on the other hand, was composed of rough, heavily forested terrain with a poor road network.

By 1 April, when the trap closed around the Germans in the Ruhr, their fate was sealed. In a matter of days they would all be killed or captured. On 4 April, the day it shifted to Bradley's control, the Ninth Army began its attack south toward the Ruhr River. In the south, the First Army's III Corps launched its strike on the 5th, and the XVIII Airborne Corps joined in on the 6th, both pushing generally northward. German resistance, initially rather determined, dwindled rapidly. By 13 April the Ninth Army had cleared the northern part of the pocket, while elements of the XVIII Airborne Corps' 8th Infantry Division reached the southern bank of the Ruhr, splitting the southern section of the pocket in two. Thousands of prisoners were being taken every day; from 16–18 April, when all opposition ended, German troops surrendered in droves throughout the region. The final tally of prisoners taken in the Ruhr reached 325,000, far beyond anything the Americans had anticipated. Tactical commanders hastily enclosed huge open fields with barbed wire creating makeshift prisoner of war camps, where the inmates awaited the end of the war and their chance to return home. Also looking forward to going home, tens of thousands of freed forced laborers and Allied prisoners of war further strained the American logistical system.

Meanwhile, the remaining Allied forces north, south, and east of the Ruhr had been adjusting their lines in preparation for the final advance through Germany. Under the new concept, Bradley's 12th Army Group would make the main effort, with Hodges' First Army in the center heading east for about 130 miles toward the city of Leipzig and the Elbe River. To the north, the Ninth Army's XIX and XIII Corps would also drive for the Elbe, toward Magdeburg, about 65 miles north


NORTH SEA
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
FRANCE
LUXEMBOURG
Army Group Netherlands
BR 21 Army Group
FIRST CDN ARMY
SECOND BR ARMY
NINTH ARMY
FIFTEENTH ARMY
Army Group B
FIRST ARMY
12th Army Group
6th Army Group
FIRST FR ARMY
NINETEENTH ARMY
2 CDN
1 CDN
1 BR
30 BR
12 BR
XXXX
XXXXX
XIII
XIX
VII
XVI
XXII
III
XVIII Abn
XXIII
II FR
I FR
VI
Amsterdam
Rotterdam
Arnhem
Cleve
Rees
Wesel
Xanten
Rheinberg
Antwerp
Brussels
Liege
Aachen
Düsseldorf
Cologne
Remagen
Koblenz
Boppard
St. Goar
Prüm
Bitburg
Trier
Givet
Bastogne
Bremen
Münster
Haltern
Dorsten
Beckum
Lippstadt
Paderborn
Giessen
Frankfurt
Mainz
Nierstein
Oppenheim
Grossgerau
Worms
Kaiserslautern
Saarbrücken
Speyer
Germersheim
Karlsruhe
Stuttgart
Strasbourg
Nancy
Châlons
Meuse R
Rhine R
Moselle R
Lippe R
Ruhr
Marne R



REDUCTION OF THE RUHR POCKET
AND
ADVANCE TO THE ELBE AND MULDE RIVERS
4–18 April 1945
Front line, 4 Apr
Front line, 9 Apr
Front line, 18 Apr
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
200
400
800 and Above
0
50
Miles
Hamburg
FIRST PRCHT ARMY
Elbe R
Army Group Northwest
Stettin
G E R M A N Y
Oder R
Berlin
Potsdam
8 BR
Weser
XIII
XXXXX
Hannover
Leine
XIX
Magdeburg
TWELFTH ARMY
XIX
XIX
XXXX
Mulde R
ELEVENTH ARMY
Torgau
Elbe R
VII
Leipzig
V
Kassel
V
XXXX
Dresden
XX
VIII
Gotha
Erfurt
Weimar
Jena
XX
Ohrdruf
VIII
THIRD ARMY
Chemnitz
VIII
XII
XV
XII
Coburg
Karlsbad
SEVENTH ARMY
Prague
XV
Main R
XXXXX
Aschaffenburg
Würzburg
Bamberg
Bayreuth
C Z E C H O S L O V A K I A
XXI
XV
XXI
Pilsen
VI
Nuremberg
Heilbronn
FIRST ARMY
G E R M A N Y
Danube R
Army Group G
Augsburg

of Leipzig, although the army commander, General Simpson, hoped he would be allowed to go all the way to Berlin. To the south, Patton's Third Army was to drive east to Chemnitz, about 40 miles southeast of Leipzig, but well short of the Elbe, and then turn southeast into Austria. At the same time, General Devers' 6th Army Group would move south through Bavaria and the Black Forest to Austria and the Alps, ending the threat of any Nazi last-ditch stand there.

On 4 April, as it paused to allow the rest of the 12th Army Group to catch up, the Third Army made two notable discoveries. Near the town of Merkers, elements of the 90th Infantry Division found a sealed salt mine containing a large portion of the German national treasure. The hoard included vast quantities of German paper currency, stacks of priceless paintings, piles of looted gold and silver jewelry and household objects, and an estimated $250,000,000 worth of gold bars and coins of various nations. The other discovery which the Third Army made on 4 April horrified and angered those who saw it. When the 4th Armored Division and elements of the 89th Infantry Division captured the small town of Ohrdruf, a few miles south of Gotha, they found the first concentration camp to be taken by the western Allies. Although the weeks to come would reveal much larger camps, this first look at the apex of Nazi inhumanity could not have been more shocking. For those who saw it, the camp was graphic evidence that the Allied cause was just, and the quick and decisive annihilation of the Third Reich a brutal necessity.

The 4 April pause in the Third Army advance allowed the other armies under Bradley's command to reach the Leine River, about 50 miles east of Paderborn. Thus all three armies of the 12th Army Group were in a fairly even north-south line, enabling them to advance abreast of each other to the Elbe. By 9 April both the Ninth and First Armies had seized bridgeheads over the Leine, prompting Bradley to order an unrestricted eastward advance. On the morning of 10 April the 12th Army Group's drive to the Elbe began in earnest.

Although the Elbe River was the official eastward objective, many American commanders still had their eyes on Berlin. By the evening of 11 April, elements of the Ninth Army's 2d Armored Division, seemingly intent on demonstrating the ease with which their army could take that coveted prize, had dashed 73 miles to reach the Elbe southeast of Magdeburg, just 50 miles short of the German capital. On 12 April additional Ninth Army elements attained the Elbe and by the next day were on the opposite bank hopefully awaiting permission to drive on to Berlin. But two days later, on 15 April, these hopes had to be abandoned. Eisenhower sent Bradley his final word on the matter:



American and Soviet troops meet east of the Elbe River. (National Archives)

the Ninth Army was to stay put—there would be no effort to take Berlin. Simpson subsequently turned the attention of his troops to mopping up pockets of local resistance.

In the center of the 12th Army Group, Hodges' First Army faced somewhat stiffer opposition, though it hardly slowed the pace. As its forces approached Leipzig, about 60 miles south of Magdeburg and 15 miles short of the Mulde River, the First Army ran into one of the few remaining centers of organized resistance. Here the Germans turned a thick defense belt of antiaircraft guns against the American ground troops with devastating effects. Through a combination of flanking movements and night attacks, First Army troops were able to destroy or bypass the guns, moving finally into Leipzig, which formally surrendered on the morning of 20 April. By the end of the day the units that had taken Leipzig joined the rest of the First Army on the Mulde, where it had been ordered to halt.


NORTH SEA
NETHERLANDS
FIRST CDN ARMY
1 CDN
2 CDN
30 BR
12 BR
8 BR
XVIII Abn
Amsterdam
Rotterdam
Arnhem
Münster
Wesel
1 BR
Br 21 Army Group
Antwerp
Brussels
BELGIUM
Liege
Cologne
Lippe R
Ruhr R
XVI
XXII
Sieg R
FIFTEENTH ARMY
Remagen
Koblenz
Lahn R
Giessen
Givet
Bastogne
12th Army Group
LUXEMBOURG
XXIII
Mainz
Frankfurt
Main R
Kaiserslautern
Saarbrücken
Karlsruhe
FIRST FR ARMY
II FR
I FR
Châlons
Meuse R
Nancy
Strasbourg
6th Army Group
Rhine R
Colmar
FRANCE
Belfort
Dijon
Basel
Zurich
Bern
SWITZERLAND
Geneva
ITALY
LEICHTENSTEIN
Bregenz
Luebeck
Wismar
Rosto
Hamburg
Bremen
Uelzen
30 BR
XIII
SECOND BR ARMY
Hannover
NINTH ARMY
XIX
Magdeburg
Leine R
Paderborn
Kassel
FIRST ARMY
VII
Leipzig
V
Erfurt
GERMANY
VIII
THIRD ARMY
Coburg
Bamberg
Bayreuth
XII
Würzburg
SEVENTH ARMY
Nuremburg
XV
XX
XXI
Heilbronn
VI
Stuttgart
Ulm
Augsburg
III
XXI
Munich
XV
Innsbruck
AU
ITALY
Bolzano



END OF THE WAR
EUROPEAN THEATER
19 April–8 May
Front line, 19 Apr
Front line, 25 Apr
Front line, 8 May
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
200
500
1000 and Above
0
100
Miles
Stettin
Oder R
Berlin
Potsdam
Frankfurt
Posen
Vistula R
Warsaw
P O L A N D
Lodz
Oder R
Neisse R
Torgau
Elbe R
Breslav
Dresden
Gorlitz
Chemnitz
Karlsbad
Prague
Cracow
C Z E C H O S L O V A K I A
Pilsen
Zilina
XII
Brunn
XII
XX
XX
Danube R
Linz
Vienna
Salzburg
Berchtesgaden
Budapest
S T R I A
H U N G A R Y
Villach
Y U G O S L A V I A

Meanwhile, on the 12th Army Group's southern flank the Third Army had advanced apace, moving 30 miles eastward to take Erfurt and Weimar, and then, by 12 April, another 30 miles through the old 1806 Jena Napoleonic battlefield area. On that day Eisenhower instructed Patton to halt the Third Army at the Mulde River, about 10 miles short of its original objective, Chemnitz. The change resulted from an agreement between the American and Soviet military leadership based on the need to establish a readily identifiable geographical line to avoid accidental clashes between the converging Allied forces. But, as the Third Army began pulling up to the Mulde on 13 April, the XII Corps, Patton's southernmost force, continued moving southeast alongside the 6th Army Group to clear southern Germany and move into Austria. After taking Coburg, about 50 miles south of Erfurt, on 11 April, XII Corps troops captured Bayreuth, 35 miles farther southeast, on 14 April.

As was the case throughout the campaign, the German will to fight was sporadic and unpredictable during the drive to the Elbe-Mulde line. Some areas were stoutly defended while in others the enemy surrendered after little more than token resistance. By sending armored spearheads around hotly contested areas, isolating them for reduction by subsequent waves of infantry, Eisenhower's forces maintained their eastward momentum. A German holdout force of 70,000 in the Harz Mountains, 40 miles north of Erfurt, was neutralized in this way, as were the towns of Erfurt, Jena, and Leipzig. While the defenders attempted to slow the 12th Army Group's drive, never was there any doubt about the ultimate outcome. The German nation was making its final efforts in the face of an opponent which had never been more potent, and in the end the sweep to the Elbe-Mulde line merely gave further testimony to the power and mobility of Eisenhower's forces.

Every unit along the Elbe-Mulde line was anxious to be the first to meet the Red Army. By the last week of April it was well known that the Soviets were close, and dozens of American patrols were probing beyond the east bank of the Mulde, hoping to meet them. Elements of the First Army's V Corps made first contact. At 1130 on 25 April a small patrol from the 69th Infantry Division met a lone Russian horseman in the village of Leckwitz. Several other patrols from the 69th had similar encounters later that day, and on 26 April the division commander, Maj. Gen. Emil F. Reinhardt, met Maj. Gen. Vladimir Rusakov of the Russian 58th Guards Infantry Division at Torgau in the first official link-up ceremony. After a nearly flawless thrust through the middle of Germany, the 12th Army Group had succeeded in splitting Hitler's forces in two.



Each house in a German village displays a white flag of surrender. (National Archives)

While the 12th Army Group made its eastward thrust, General Devers' 6th Army Group to the south had the dual mission of protecting the 12th Army Group's right flank and eliminating any German attempt to make a last stand in the Alps of southern Germany and western Austria. To accomplish both objectives, Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch's Seventh Army on Devers' left was to make a great arc, first driving northeastward alongside Bradley's flank, then turning south with the Third Army to take Nuremberg and Munich, ultimately continuing into Austria. The First French Army was to attack to the south and southeast, taking Stuttgart before moving to the Swiss border and into Austria.

Initially the opposition in the 6th Army Group's sector was stiffer than that facing the 12th Army Group. The German forces there were simply in less disarray than those to the north. Nevertheless, the Seventh Army broke out of its Rhine bridgehead, just south of Frankfurt, on 28 March, employing elements of three corps—the XV Corps to the north, the XXI Corps in the center, and the VI Corps to the south. The XV Corps' 45th Infantry Division fought for six days before taking the city of Aschaffenburg, 35 miles east of the Rhine, on

3 April. To the south, elements of the VI Corps met unexpectedly fierce resistance at Heilbronn, 40 miles into the German rear. Despite a wide armored thrust to envelop the enemy defenses, it took nine days of intense fighting to bring Heilbronn fully under American control. Still, by 11 April the Seventh Army had penetrated the German defenses in depth, especially in the north, and was ready to begin its wheeling movement southeast and south. Thus, on 15 April when Eisenhower ordered Patton's entire Third Army to drive southeast down the Danube River valley to Linz, and south to Salzburg and central Austria, he also instructed the 6th Army Group to make a similar turn into southern Germany and western Austria.

Advancing along this new axis the Seventh Army's left rapidly overran Bamberg, over 100 miles east of the Rhine, on its way to Nuremberg, about 30 miles to the south. As its forces reached the latter city on 16 April, the Seventh Army ran into the same type of antiaircraft gun defense that the First Army was facing at Leipzig. Only on 20 April, after breaching the ring of antiaircraft guns and fighting house-to-house for the city, did its forces take Nuremberg.

Following the capture of Nuremberg, the Seventh Army discovered little resistance as the XXI Corps' 12th Armored Division dashed 50 miles to the Danube, crossing it on 22 April, followed several days later by the rest of the corps and the XV Corps as well.

Meanwhile, on the Seventh Army's right the VI Corps had moved southeast alongside the First French Army. In a double envelopment the French captured Stuttgart on 21 April, and by the next day both the French and the VI Corps had elements on the Danube. Similarly, the Third Army on the 6th Army Group's left flank had advanced rapidly against very little resistance, its lead elements reaching the river on 24 April.

As the 6th Army Group and the Third Army finished clearing southern Germany and approached Austria, it was clear to most observers, Allied and German alike, that the war was nearly over. Many towns flew white flags of surrender to spare themselves the otherwise inevitable destruction suffered by those that resisted, while German troops surrendered by the tens of thousands, sometimes as entire units.

On 30 April elements of the XV and XXI Corps captured Munich, 40 miles south of the Danube, while the first elements of the VI Corps had already entered Austria two days earlier. On 4 May, the Third Army's V and XII Corps advanced into Czechoslovakia, and units of the VI Corps met elements of the Fifth U.S. Army on the Italian frontier, linking the European and Mediterranean theaters. Also on 4 May,



Victory parade in Dusseldorf, Germany, on V–E Day, 8 May 1945. (National Archives)

after a shift in interarmy boundaries which placed Salzburg in the Seventh Army sector, that city surrendered to elements of the XV Corps. The XV Corps also captured Berchtesgaden, the town that would have been Hitler's command post in the National Redoubt. With all passes to the Alps now sealed, however, there would be no final redoubt in Austria or anywhere else. In a few days the war in Europe would be over.

While the Allied armies in the south marched to the Alps, Montgomery's 21 Army Group drove north and northeast. The British Second Army's right wing reached the Elbe southeast of Hamburg on 19 April. Its left fought for a week to capture Bremen, which fell on 26 April. On 29 April the British made an assault crossing of the Elbe, supported on the following day by the recently reattached XVIII Airborne Corps. The bridgehead expanded rapidly, and by 2 May Luebeck and Wismar, 40 to 50 miles beyond the river, were in Allied hands, sealing off the Germans in the Jutland peninsula.

On the 21 Army Group's left, one corps of the First Canadian Army reached the North Sea near the Dutch-German border on 16 April, while another drove through the central Netherlands, trapping the German forces remaining in that country. However, concerned that

the bypassed Germans would flood much of the nation and cause complete famine among a Dutch population already near starvation, Eisenhower approved an agreement with the local enemy commanders to allow the Allies to air-drop food into the country in return for a local cease-fire on the battlefield. The ensuing airdrops, which began on 28 April, marked the beginning of what was to become a colossal American-led effort to put war-torn Europe back together again.

By the end of April the Third Reich's twilight was turning to night. Its armies in tatters, Germany retained only a small fraction of the territory it had conquered a few years before. Of the land still under Nazi control almost none was actually in Germany. With his escape route to the south severed by the 12th Army Group's eastward drive and Berlin surrounded by the Soviets, Adolf Hitler committed suicide on 30 April, leaving to his successor, Admiral Karl Doenitz, the task of capitulation. After attempting to strike a deal whereby he would surrender only to the western Allies—a proposal which was summarily rejected—on 7 May Doenitz granted his representative, General Alfred Jodl, permission to effect a complete surrender on all fronts. The appropriate documents were signed on the same day and became effective on 8 May. Despite scattered resistance from a few isolated units, the war in Europe was over.

Analysis

By the beginning of the Central Europe Campaign, Allied victory in Europe was inevitable. Having gambled his future ability to defend Germany on the Ardennes offensive and lost, Hitler had no real strength left to stop the powerful Allied armies. Yet Hitler forced the Allies to fight, often bitterly, for final victory. Even when the hopelessness of the German situation became obvious to his most loyal subordinates, Hitler refused to admit defeat. Only when Soviet artillery was falling around his Berlin headquarters bunker did the German *Fuehrer* begin to perceive the final outcome of his megalomaniacal crusade.

The crossing of the Rhine, the encirclement and reduction of the Ruhr, and the sweep to the Elbe-Mulde line and the Alps all established the final campaign on the Western Front as a showcase for Allied superiority in maneuver warfare. Drawing on the experience gained during the drive from Normandy to the Rhine, the western Allies demonstrated in central Europe their capability of absorbing the lessons of the past. By attaching mechanized infantry units to armored divisions they created a hybrid of strength and mobility which served

them well in the pursuit warfare through Germany. Key to the effort were the logistical support that kept these forces fueled and the determination to maintain the forward momentum at all costs. With these mobile forces making great thrusts to isolate pockets of German troops which were mopped up by additional infantry following close behind the Allies rapidly eroded Hitler's remaining ability to resist.

For their part, captured German soldiers often claimed to be most impressed not by American armor or infantry but by the artillery. They frequently remarked upon its accuracy, the swiftness with which it acquired targets, and especially the prodigality with which artillery ammunition was expended. Coming from an army which considered shells expensive and human life cheap, it seemed to many German soldiers that Americans were simply wasteful in their employment of artillery. The fact that liberal use of artillery prevented the deaths of uncounted American infantrymen seemed to escape many Germans, perhaps because it cost so many German lives.

In retrospect, very few questionable decisions were made concerning the execution of the campaign. Perhaps Patton could have made his initial Rhine crossing north of Mainz and avoided the losses incurred crossing the Main. Also, the airborne operation in support of the 21 Army Group's Rhine crossing was probably not worth the risk. But these decisions were made in good faith and had little bearing on the ultimate outcome of the campaign. On the whole, Allied plans were excellent as demonstrated by the rapidity with which their objectives were met. In the end, just as the Red Army's destruction of the *Wehrmacht* in the east established the Soviet Union's position as a postwar superpower, so the American Army's leading role in the final conquest of Germany, not only in providing manpower and materiel, but also in terms of strategy and tactics, presaged the important new position the United States would occupy in the postwar world.

CENTRAL EUROPE 1945

Further Readings

The best narrative account of the final campaign in the European theater is Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive* (1973), a volume from the official U.S. Army in World War II series. Other excellent accounts are found in John Toland, *The Last 100 Days* (1966), and Russel F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* (1981). Several of the top commanders involved in the campaign published memoirs after the war, and these provide the opportunity to examine the events from various viewpoints. Among the best are Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (1948); Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldiers Story* (1951); and George S. Patton, *War As I Knew It* (1947). For the British view, see Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *Normandy to the Baltic* (1947). Two worthwhile volumes which explore the Supreme Commander's decision-making processes are Walter Bedell Smith, *Eisenhower's Six Great Decisions* (1956), and Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower and Berlin, 1945—The Decision to Halt at the Elbe* (1967).

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Cover: *Loaded with troops, assault boats cross the Rhine at St. Goar, Germany.* (National Archives)

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